

# GOLDEN HOUR

*Psychoanalysis, Narrative, and Visual Culture  
in Family Oral History*

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## *Psychoanalysis, Narrative, and Visual Culture in Family Oral History*

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Listening is directing attention to what is heard, gathering meaning, interpreting and deciding on action. Quantum listening is listening to more than one reality simultaneously. Listening for the least differences possible to perceive—perception at the edge of the new. Jumping like an atom out of orbit to a new orbit—creating a new orbit—as an atom occupies both spaces at once one listens in both places at once. Mothers do this. One focuses on a point and changes that point by listening.

–Pauline Oliveros, Quantum Listening<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Most babies can hear their birthing parent's heartbeat and other sounds inside of their body starting around four months gestation. These early, muffled sounds are transmitted primarily through bone conduction, as the parent's voice is carried through sonic vibrations from their vertebral column to their pelvis to the bones in the baby's head. Shifting to a head down position, as most babies do in the final trimester, helps sounds become clearer, as this is the time when the baby's head is closest to the birthing parent's pelvic bones. After six months, babies in utero can make out their parents' voices and other familiar sounds outside of the womb. Studies have shown that babies in utero recognize and respond to their birthing parent's voice through slowed movement and heartbeat, indicating that the sound may be soothing to them.<sup>2</sup>

Because babies in the intrauterine environment understand communications in terms of sensory feeling rather than linguistic meaning, their experience of their parents' voices comes from pure sensation: their listening is embodied, open, and absorbing. Unable to understand *what* is being communicated in the form of language, babies develop their ability to interpret communications based on *how* something is said. After birth, as babies learn to understand and communicate in verbal language, they direct a tremendous amount of attention towards exploring sound and communicating meaning. This is part of why experimental composer and musicologist

Pauline Oliveros writes in her book *Quantum Listening* that babies are the best listeners.<sup>3</sup>

But something is also lost in the acquisition of language. Working towards verbal communication requires infants and young children to translate raw emotional energy into more formal communicative expressions, a move that inevitably constitutes a flattening of experience. In a necessary effort to understand and connect with their young child after birth, parents ascribe a set of needs, desires, and other emotional experiences onto them that cannot possibly encompass the entirety of their child's experience. This happens in ordinary moments when, in response to a baby's cries, attentive parents attempt to identify their needs by inscribing a concrete desire upon their child – "You must be hungry. You want milk." Here, despite the parent's best intentions, language forces itself into the child's experience from the outside in, narrowing an emotional experience that was once vast, complex, and undefined into a single word or phrase. This entrance into the symbolic realm creates a gap between the quality of our experiences and our ability to express them that we navigate our entire lives, as even the most carefully selected words can only represent what we feel, not transmit the feelings themselves. This is part of why some psychoanalysts interested in language development, such as Jacques Lacan, consider the demand to enter language a point of trauma for children. For Lacan, language acquisition represented a break from the self, an early traumatic event that he argued was a constitutive element of being a human being with language.<sup>4</sup> Psychoanalysis has attempted to attend to this language break by paying attention to

moments of verbal rupture—the ways in which unconscious feeling seeps into the conscious through speech errors, repeated words or phrases, and dreams.

Other analysts have pointed to alienating moments in our development that begin even earlier than language acquisition. Sigmund Freud characterized the prenatal to postnatal passage as a “caesura,” which translates to break, and most often refers to a pause in a verse of poetry.<sup>5</sup> In Freud’s terms, the caesura represents the moment of birth as a split from the other that we contend with our whole lives. Wilfred Bion, a relational psychoanalyst who studied under child analysis pioneer Melanie Klein, elaborated Freud’s theory by framing the caesura of birth as a way of understanding the gaps between ourselves and others. In Bion’s view, this initial break leaves us with a boundary between self and other that is permeable and constantly in flux, thickening and thinning throughout the motions of our daily lives, shaping and being shaped by each relational encounter.<sup>6</sup> But as my mother, a former birthworker, was quick to remind me when I brought this theory to her, Bion probably did not attend very many births. If he had, he’d have understood that not all transitions into life are equally traumatic. Even in healthy births where most things go as planned, small moments matter, and there are ways to make the passage from the intrauterine environment to the outside world less harsh. Resting the baby immediately on the birthing parent’s chest after birth, for example, helps parent and child co-regulate, easing the transition from the internal world to the external world through maintaining skin contact. This step towards relational intimacy in the baby’s earliest moments of life is the first in a lifelong effort

towards achieving attunement with others.

What does it mean to intentionally commit oneself to that effort through listening? Oral history is a discipline that engages deeply and rigorously with the process of attunement. On the first day of Roots and Branches, Columbia University's Oral History Master of Arts program's course on the theory and methodology of oral history, Professor Nyssa Chow explained how a successful oral history encounter should feel by instructing us to imagine holding a bowl of water with the person we are interviewing. As the conversation unfolds, one imagines the narrator and the interviewer's hands moving in a continuous circular motion, swirling the water in unison. In a good conversation, she told us, the water should remain in constant motion without spilling over the edges of the container. As we'd listen to interviews in class, Nyssa would ask us to listen for the bowl of water— for moments when it swirled, stilled, or overflowed. I believe that we turned to this metaphor so often because it usefully characterizes one of the things that matters most in an oral history encounter: achieving a level of attunement and co-regulation through conversation. Unlike many other disciplines dedicated to documenting history, oral history prioritizes intersubjective awareness as an integral element of ethical interview practice. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli has defined the interview as an “exchange of gazes,” co-created by two different people, both of whom are at once observing and being observed by one another. Because oral historians understand the interview as a site for the production, not simply the transmission, of knowledge and meaning, the relationship between the two interlocutors directly affects

the historical documents that are produced, so understanding and attending to what is happening inside of that relationship and why is essential. The oral history encounter, as Portelli has it, is ultimately about the distance we have to cross in order to reach one another.<sup>7</sup>

In his book *À l'écoute (Listening)* philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy offers a definition of a French term for listening, “tendre l’oreille” that literally means “to stretch the ear,” defined by a straining towards something.<sup>8</sup> The etymology of the English word “listen” goes back to the root word “list,” which in Middle English meant to hear or to hear-ken. But there are also other definitions of list, like limit, border, or boundary, or “to tilt, lean, incline to one side, especially of a ship.” The latter version was originally spelled “lust,” which some linguists speculate was an alternate spelling of “lysten,” meaning desire, developed from the idea that one leans towards what one desires.<sup>9</sup> In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson describes desire as a three-part structure, composed of the lover, the beloved, and the thing that stands between them. In this triangulation, it is the angle of lack or absence, Carson argues, that fuels desire, as the lovers reach for completeness across the distance. Through her lens, eros emerges from a deep longing to reach another person.<sup>10</sup> Bion also defines the caesura in terms of access to another person, or another part of the self, across separation. “How is one to penetrate this obstacle, this caesura of birth?” he wonders. “Can any method of communication be sufficiently penetrating?”<sup>11</sup>

This essay proposes the kind of listening we do in oral history as a kind of desirous stretching towards another, not only in an active effort to close the distance Portelli

describes, but also as a way of attending to Lacan's language wound and Bion's caesura. The distance we think most often about traversing in oral history is usually cross-cultural, borne in part from divergent experiences of gender, racial, or class identities, and this is surely an area where intersubjective awareness and interrogation are needed. But distance and difference between members of the same community can be equally challenging and complex, as well as enormously instructive for navigating different interpretations and experiences of shared history. Since our earliest listening encounters take place within the family, family oral history projects can be particularly useful case studies, allowing us to trace the ways more capacious listening practices might afford opportunities for attunement and narrative healing in those relationships, and in our history-keeping practices more broadly. For this reason, the fulcrum of this essay is an oral history project about my grandmother's paintings that I worked on with my family in 2024 and 2025, and curated through a series of informal experiments in performance, documentary, text, and group listening. Because my intention for the project was not to document my family's stories for public consumption, but rather to explore how the oral history method might serve as a tool for sorting through divergent experiences of memory and shared history inside my family system, very little content from my interviews appears in this paper. The primary audience for those interviews is my narrators, whose stories are intended to be shared with one another rather than with outside observers. Instead, this paper traces the various stages of the project through the lens of fields such as relational psychoanalysis,

photography criticism, and other family oral history, documentary and performance projects, all of which concern themselves in different but intersecting ways with navigating boundaries between self and other. In exploring the ways these approaches and the listening practices they entail might bring us closer to closing the distance, or passing the caesura, I also ask what this process might reveal more broadly about the oral history interview's intersubjective possibilities and limitations.

I begin this essay with sonic transmission in the womb and language acquisition not to nostalgize a time before language or birth, but rather to invite a consideration of how from our earliest moments, we are formed by listening—both in how we listen and in how we are listened to. Given this, I am asking how certain modes of listening and creative documentation beyond language might present an intervention for achieving the kind of affective attunement, intimacy, and mutual recognition that can often be scarce or difficult to access in the space of the family and beyond. By framing listening as a stretch towards another person, I am also proposing a form of listening and interpretation that locates itself within the rich space between knowing and not knowing which I believe oral history, art, and psychoanalysis all inhabit. This work is an exercise in measuring the dimensions of that space—its utility and its challenges—and, by proxy, navigating the necessary and generative murkiness of fact and fiction in personal history projects, and in our relationships with one another more broadly.

Historical knowledge of our loved ones' history, which is also our history, is not the only thing family oral history

projects are capable of producing. Family interviews have the capacity to act as what psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott would call 'holding environments,' nurturing atmospheres in which people can explore their emotions deeply and without judgment, presenting opportunities for intentional listening that can restore and build new forms of intimacy, recognition, and trust.<sup>12</sup> In their methodological allegiance to person-centered history and openness to subjective truth, family oral history encounters present an opportunity not only to reclaim historical narratives, but also to build intragroup comfort with and meaning-making opportunities around conflicting experiences of shared history when narratives do not align. In its capaciousness and multimodality, oral history presents a flexible and collaborative medium for re-negotiating collective memory and activating the family archive through creativity, rehearsal, and play. Most of all, close study of the oral history encounter invites us to spend time inside of an environment intentionally dedicated to listening, examine its parts, and consider how we might extend some portion of the intersubjective rigor and meticulous care that space asks of us into other areas of our lives.



I conducted the following interview with my mother over the phone on December 2, 2025 as part of my research for this essay. The transcript has been lightly edited by both of us for clarity and concision.

**SAGE FOSTER-LASSER**

*Okay, I'm recording now. You can hear that?*

ILLYSA FOSTER-LASSER

*Mhmm.*



Illysa, 1999  
*Tangled Hair*



Moseah and Carmen, 1998  
*Tangled Hair*

PAININGS BY CARMEN CLEMENTS

Carmen Clements  
*Portrait of Illysa*, 1981  
Oil on canvas  
36 × 24 inches



Carmen Clements  
*The Best of All Possible Worlds*, 1987  
Oil on wood panel  
28 × 35 inches

CARMEN



Carmen Clements  
*Beuna's Bed*, 1987  
Oil on canvas  
48 × 30 inches



Carmen Clements

*Tangled Hair*, n.d.

Oil on canvas

36 × 36 inches



Carmen Clements  
*Mirrored*, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
Dimensions unknown



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